

ON THE EDGE OF A WORLD HERITAGE SITE: LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE RELATED TO THE NOMINATION OF THE NEW CALEDONIA CORAL REEF

*En el límite de un bien Patrimonio Mundial:
Comunidades locales y práctica arqueológica en relación con la nominación
del arrecife de coral de Nueva Caledonia*

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ABSTRACT

The nomination of six portions of the New Caledonian coral reef as a natural World Heritage Site in 2009 has led, in his wake, to a profound change in archaeological practice in some parts of this multicultural archipelago of Southern Melanesia. This has especially been the case in the region of Bourail, where a large-scale economic development program was started to attract tourists to the reef, with the construction of hotels, an international 18 holes golf course and related infrastructures, all included in the immediate buffer zone of the site. The paper will present the changes witnessed in relation to heritage management as part of the overall development projects. Due to a community-driven demand, the Provincial Services in charge of heritage preservation, have agreed to the idea of the local stakeholders to impose a general archaeological survey of surface sites (abandoned villages, planting grounds, burial areas etc), followed by large-scale rescue excavations before any construction. In total, over 300 sites have been documented to date in the 8000 hectares of the property. Over 13000 m² of surfaces have been excavated, making this area the largest single excavation project ever done in Melanesia. The paper will focus on the specific agreements finalized with the indigenous Kanak groups, as part of the archaeological procedures, around the discovery and study of human remains, before summarizing the main results of the program. These have shown an unexpected number of landscape transformations during the last 3000 years, with the massive expansion of the seashore dune system as well as the intensified occupation of the inland areas over the last 700 years before first European contact. The presentation of the results to

the public through site visits, films, exhibitions, on-site panels and publications, has allowed the collective appropriation of the archaeological discoveries by the inhabitants of the Bourail region and beyond, whatever their cultural origins.

Key words: New Caledonia, Deva, local communities, archaeological heritage, economic development, impact assessment, collective appropriation.

RESUMEN

El nombramiento de seis porciones de los arrecifes de coral de Nueva Caledonia como natural patrimonio de la humanidad en el año 2009 ha conducido, en su raíz, a un cambio profundo en la práctica arqueológica en algunas partes de este archipiélago de la Melanesia meridional multicultural. Esto ha sido especialmente el caso en la región de Bourail, donde se inició un programa de desarrollo económico a gran escala para atraer a turistas al arrecife, con la construcción de hoteles, un campo de golf internacional de 18 hoyos y las infraestructuras relacionadas, todo ello incluido en la zona de amortiguamiento inmediata del sitio. El documento presentará los cambios de que fueron testigos en relación con la gestión del patrimonio como parte de los proyectos de desarrollo general. Debido a la demanda por parte de la comunidad, los servicios provinciales a cargo de la conservación del patrimonio, han convenido en la idea de los actores locales para imponer un estudio arqueológico general de sitios superficiales (abandonado aldeas, plantación de jardines, áreas de entierro etc.), seguido por las excavaciones de rescate a gran escala antes de cualquier construcción. En total, más de 300 páginas se han documentado hasta la fecha en las 8000 hectáreas de la propiedad. Se han excavado más de 13000 m² de superficies, haciendo esta área el proyecto de excavación solo más grande jamás hecho en Melanesia. La ponencia se centrará en los acuerdos específicos que finalizó con los grupos indígenas de Kanak, como parte de los procedimientos arqueológicos, el descubrimiento y estudio de restos humanos, antes de resumir los principales resultados del programa. Estos han demostrado un número inesperado de las transformaciones del paisaje durante los últimos 3000 años, con la expansión masiva del sistema dunar de la costa, así como la ocupación intensificada de las zonas del interior en los últimos 700 años antes del primer contacto europeo. La presentación de los resultados al público a través de visitas, películas, exposiciones, paneles in situ y publicaciones, ha permitido la apropiación colectiva de los descubrimientos arqueológicos por los habitantes de la región de Bourail y más allá, sea cual sea su origen cultural.

Palabras clave: Nueva Caledonia, Deva, las comunidades locales, patrimonio arqueológico, desarrollo económico, evaluación de impacto, apropiación colectiva.

1. INTRODUCTION

Heritage has a strong political and symbolic power. It can unite as well as separate people, depending on the place under scrutiny, the historical moment, the religious context, the political battles. The overall meaning of heritage is diverse and variable depending on the culture considered, as well as amongst the individuals of a given community. Once believed to be inscribed as a once and for all universal mantra dictated by a supposedly unique Western vision of the concept, heritage practice in its incredible diversity, today questions our beliefs of a common way to apprehend the challenges that we face in preserving the legacies of our forefathers in a globalizing world. These questions are not the sole prerogative of anthropology specialists trying to approach things as a great picture, but arise unexpectedly also in very local contexts, where communities with different cultural and historical backgrounds have to mitigate their approach and sharing of a common heritage. One of such places in the archipelago of New Caledonia in Oceania, where the French colonial process of the 19th century has assembled on the same island people of different origins, who try today, in a decolonizing political process, to build a common future. Although an outmoded question for European countries, defining the symbolic roots of the future nation - whatever its political status - is strongly imbedded in historical legitimacies, in which archaeology plays a central role. This paper will use in this general theme a case study from a community-driven process of heritage study and preservation, to highlight how local communities can have a major input in changing the ways archaeological impact studies are imposed upon economic developers.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

New Caledonia is the southernmost archipelago of Island Melanesia in the south-western Pacific (fig. 1). As the rest of the region, the large island called Grande Terre and its smaller surrounding neighbours were settled about 3000 years ago, during a migration from the north related to the Lapita Cultural Complex (Sand and Bedford 2010). Over the two succeeding millennia, adaptation strategies and cultural evolutions led to the progressive rise of a specific local traditional Kanak Cultural Complex, characterized by a significant intensification of the use of the different landscapes (Sand et al. 2003). European exploration and subsequent colonisation of Oceania introduced a series of major cultural, political and demographic changes to the region. New Caledonia was colonized by France in the middle of the 19th century, in order to create a penal colony copying the Australian experience of convict settlement. The need for land to settle the

convicts, led to a massive process of land dispossession against the indigenous Kanak groups, already affected by deadly epidemics linked to diseases introduced by the Westerners. Economic needs fostered a series of introductions of other foreign workers from Asia and the Pacific, mainly to work in mines, prompting the establishment of a segregated society and a harsh colonial system (Terrier 2012). After WWII, the end of colonial rule and the advent of a democratic organisation favoured cultural integration, that however didn't prevent, from the 1970s onward, the rise of an indigenous movement for self-determination and independence. This led in the 1980s to a civil war, before political agreements opened a period of shared development between the different cultural communities living in the archipelago, centred around the official recognition of indigenous rights and culture. New Caledonia is today an overseas country within the French nation, with a local government and provincial institutions who control most of the political, economic and social aspects of everyday functioning (Gay 2014).

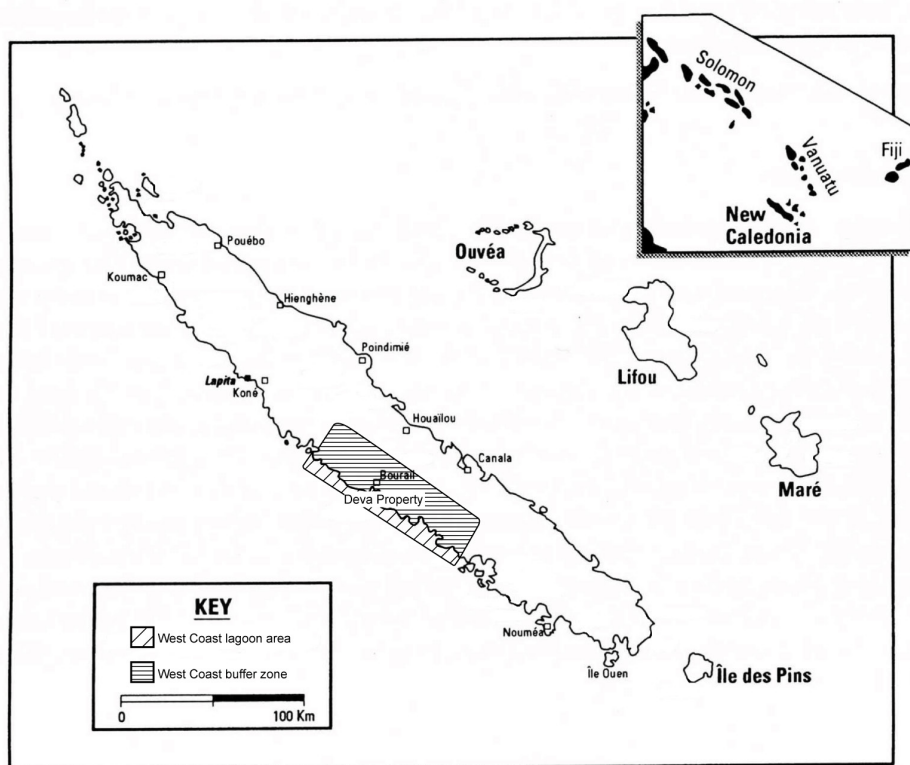


Figure 1. Map of New Caledonia in the Western Pacific, and location of the Deva property.

3. CONSEQUENCES OF THE INSCRIPTION OF NEW CALEDONIA'S CORAL REEFS ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST OF UNESCO

It is in this complex general historical context that in the early 2000s was proposed the inscription of the Coral Reefs of the archipelago as a World heritage site of UNESCO. In a first phase of discussions, the dossier centred around a mixed nomination. But due to the complexity of the cultural mix that characterize the different communities of the archipelago, it appeared soon that the only way forward was to restrict the nomination proposal to the natural component. In 2008, 6 areas of the Reef were inscribed as the 1115 World Heritage site. The nomination dossier stressed the vital links between the natural environment of the lagoon/reefs and the populations living at its border, who extract some of their everyday needs from the sea and have, aside from leisure activities, developed a whole set of spiritual and symbolic relationships with the ocean. For 3000 years, the indigenous groups have especially built a massive knowledge of the natural biotopes that extend from the shore of the beaches all the way to the cliffs of the outer reefs. Navigation, fishing, diving, shell collecting, were all imbedded into a whole series of rituals and magic rules, which shaped the activities linked to the sea (Leenhardt 1930; Leblic 2008). The historically recent settlers have also developed an array of unique links to this environment. All this was and is still connected, in terms of spatial settings, to fishing communities living at the immediate back of the seashores. Indirectly therefore, the UNESCO nomination of New Caledonia's Coral Reefs has prompted a whole set of cultural claims around the coastal areas directly related to the inscribed sites. This paper would like to take the example of the West Coast lagoon area, where the attention brought to cultural landscapes has lead to a unique experience of archaeological impact studies in the Pacific.

The West Coast lagoon area is located in the central part of Grande Terre and is characterized by a narrow stretch of lagoon, explained geologically by the presence of a deep trench in the geological basement. The dossier has chosen to protect this 482 km² wide area with a huge 1713 km² terrestrial buffer zone that extends up to the central mountainous divide of the island. In this buffer zone, the main concern of conservation is the protection of the natural landscape, endangered by the presence of invasive plant species as well as by animal pests like the introduced deer. The local communities however, be they indigenous or of colonial background, have also raised the imperative need to take into account the protection of the cultural landscapes. This has especially been the case during the discussions on the economic development of a large public property of 8500 hectares in Deva, facing the most accessible and one of the most pristine lagoon

areas for tourism. In a context of multi-million euros of investment for hotel and golf constructions, local groups have strongly advocated for the imposition of a series of strict impact study rules, in order to include at every stage of the project, the study of the cultural landscapes. This is a first in the 150 years history of modern economy in the archipelago (Sand et al. 2011a). The demand was part of a larger discussion around the inclusion of local communities into the benefit-sharing of development, which led to an official agreement by the indigenous Kanak groups linked to the area, to abandon their land claims in exchange of a clearly stated participation in the economic projects.

4. CHANGING ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICES IN IMPACT STUDIES

The introduction of archaeology at every step of the development of the Deva property has profoundly changed the way we were able to approach this cultural landscape. In New Caledonia, as in most archipelagos of the Pacific, excavations are often confined to the opening of a few square meters, due to financial and time constraints (Sand et al. 2008). In some desperate cases, a test-pit can sometimes not even reach a whole square meter. An excavation of a few tens of square meters is considered as a large-scale study. In the specific colonial and post-colonial context of New Caledonia, the political outcomes of archaeology have also had an influence on the financial support given to local researchers and though to the extent of excavations (Sand et al. 2011b). Private developers and landowners don't want to see archaeologists walking in their backyard, and indigenous landowners often consider that the imposition of rescue excavations on their traditional property would be disrespectful of their customary rights (Sand et al. 2006). In this overall context, the benefit that local archaeologists have gained from the changes induced by the UNESCO nomination, has been the possibility, for the first time in New Caledonia, to conduct a long term archaeological impact study imposed to the public and private developers by the local stakeholders. The paper will present the different steps followed, and some of the results gained from the project.

a. What do the local communities know about their past?

The Deva landscape is characterized by a 13 km long and 1.5 km large seashore plain, partly composed of low sand-dunes, facing a series of small valleys limited by low hills not exceeding 300 m in altitude. The whole area is separated from the rest of the geographical surrounding, receiving for example no extra water input from streams coming from the mountainous inland. This renders Deva prone to periods of intensive drought, a characteristic that must have influenced

the way people occupied the place, in the past as today. In the structuring phase of the multi-scale impact study, it appeared essential that the first field phase in our understanding of this vast coastal area of the west coast of Grande Terre that had never received any archaeological interest, should start by fulfilling a large recording program on the oral traditions of Deva with the indigenous Kanak groups and other communities of the center of Grande Terre. This led to months-long enquiries amongst the different tribes of the region. Although different claims are apparent between clans and families, as is usually the case in the Pacific in land issues based only on oral traditions, the work allowed to finalize the first-ever map of the former customary divisions that structured the Deva seashore, with the identification of three different clanic groups occupying the different main valleys and their foreshores (Gony 2006).



Figure 2. Excavations underway on a Kanak raised house mound with the help of local stakeholders.

Once a general understanding of the customary situation was achieved, the second field phase concentrated on a general archaeological survey on the 8500 hectares forming the Deva public property. At the explicit demand of the local stakeholders, this was done before the start of any development project. Over a 2 months period of field survey, over 200 different sites were located and recorded (Domergue 2009). The surveys were done with the help of Kanak elders who had worked on the Deva property and knew some of the locations of former sites.

These were mainly characterized by raised Kanak house mounds, dispersed in the landscape or assembled in clusters of traditional hamlets (fig. 2). Most of the former habitats were located on hill ridges or along the streams in the bottom of the valleys. The second main category of sites comprised horticultural planting structures, mainly in the form of raised yam fields. These were constructed in the valley plains, but also on the hill sides, sometimes in fairly steep environments. Around these two types of structures were often recorded heaps of shell-midden and scatters of potsherds. The third category of sites consisted of burials, consisting of bone piles placed in small rocky outcrops and shelters. The mapping and dating of some of these sites allowed to identify that most of the occupations visible on the ground are linked to the second millennium AD, although a few favorable areas inland were settled from the end of the first millennium BC onwards (Sand et al. 2013).

b. Community driven impact studies in an economic development context

The field surveys having shown the presence of pottery and shell remains in a number of seashore locations where economic projects were about to take place, the local stakeholders imposed a series of major archaeological impact assessments in this coastal area of the Deva property. As part of the preliminary studies for a large hotel project, over 120 test-pits were opened with the assistance of a backhoe, over a total field area of 40 hectares. This study was meant to gain a first understanding of the type of remains present in the sandy dune environment stretching from the seashore to about 400 m inland, revealing that the cultural stratigraphy didn't exceed 65 cm of maximal depth in each pit. More significantly, the dating of the remains of stone ovens, post-holes and hearths excavated, alongside the analysis of the cultural material, revealed a process of slow dune building and progradation during the last 3500 years. At first human arrival about 3000 years ago, the dune system was narrow and located between 300 m and 400 m at the back of the present seashore. This is where the Lapita and immediate post-Lapita fishermen settled. Their descendants changed location of their habitat a few tens of meters when a new dune formed, preventing in this process the mixing of cultural material from different periods. What has been revealed on the seashore of Deva is therefore the formation over time, of a "horizontal stratigraphy" over a 400 m distance in some places (Sand et al. 2008, 2013).

Once this general understanding was achieved and a first map of the location of potential rich areas was published, the second impact study concentrated on focused excavations, again with a backhoe, in the locations of the planned hotel buildings and tourist rooms. Most of these locations did not show the presence

of important archaeological remains. Only in two cases, after the discovery of burials, where the rooms pushed a few meters away, in order to prevent bone removal. These discoveries forced the different stakeholders (indigenous groups, public administrations, private developers, archaeologists), to discuss the way human burials should be treated. It was decided in the end that for the whole Deva area, these remains would be seen as non removable items and protected by a 4 m² non constructible square, positioned on all the maps. This had a series of major consequences for the hotel project, as one of the richest location identified in the impact study revealed, after the excavation of a 650 m² rectangle, the presence of 5 burials (fig. 3) (Sand et al. 2013). Their discovery forced the architects to remove one of the buildings of the Hotel project completely.



Figure 3. View of the excavation which necessitated the cancellation of a hotel building project. Symbolic cloths have been attached to the sacred banian tree.

The excavation of one of these burials revealed for the first time in archaeological context, the presence of about 20 small carved shell pendants, used as decorative elements in the traditional Kanak exchange money. This discovery fostered a large interest from the local communities, as it could be related to a series of oral traditions telling of the central importance of the Deva region in the production of traditional shell money in the past. It also created a new problem, as in Kanak customary terms, removing objects from a burial is potentially dangerous. The question was settled after discussions amongst Kanaks, between the local clan

representatives and indigenous archaeologists, by agreeing to rebury some of the shell pendants and to keep others as archaeological items. It was then also decided that permission was granted to the archaeologists to retrieve three small bones from each tomb before reburial: one for dating, one for isotope analysis, and one for a future DNA study, when we will consider that the technology is powerful enough to extract usable samples. As a consequence, the scientific study process of the burials discovered in Deva is therefore achieved through visual observation of body placement, observation of possible pathologies, measurement *in situ* and without bone movement of the length of the main bones, recording of altitudes, associated to two analytical results (dating and isotope) (Bolé et al. in press). The reburial (fig. 4) allows on its side to respect the beliefs of the local communities in the sacredness of human remains, at the expense of the free use of the landscape for pure economic development at the end of the archaeological impact study.



Figure 4. Modern structures built on top of human burials after archaeological excavations.

A larger impact study over an area of 140 hectares was ordered after the study on the Hotel location, before the construction of a 18 hole Golf Course. This led to the excavation and dating of a number of former Kanak habitation sites along the stream banks in the valley, as well as the discovery of a new series of burials in one of the areas of the dunes. The dating of the burials revealed a temporal cluster of interments in the central period of the first millennium AD (Sand et al. 2013). It raised questions on the symbolic significance of covering some of the human remains by a golf mound as planned in the original map, which halted the construction for a long series of months. But the discovery of these burials

had one other impact. The building of the Golf Course appeared to necessitate a large amount of sand, prompting the project managers to plan for the opening of a one hectare sand quarry adjoined to the Golf Course. Worried that the removal of the upper archaeological layer would destroy burials, the local stakeholders ordered the complete excavation of the quarry area before the start of the sand removal. This embarked us on the largest single excavation-surface ever opened in Melanesia (fig. 5), who was fulfilled over a period of 4 months with the help of a backhoe. A large array of cultural material and associated structures was discovered during the excavations (Sand et al. 2013). One of the most significant discoveries was the identification of a 2000 years old shell-beads manufacturing area, interpreted as a production center of pre-traditional shell money. This indicated that the tradition of shell money production known in the Kanak oral traditions for Deva, has a very long history.



Figure 5. The one hectare excavation of Deva under study before the opening of a sand quarry.

CONCLUSION

The dynamic process of the archaeological impact studies conducted on the public property of Deva on the west coast of New Caledonia's Grande Terre summarized here, cannot be understood without taking into account its direct link to the nomination of the Deva reef as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Although a natural property, the nomination forced in its wake the different political, customary and private stakeholders associated to the economic development of the area, to take into consideration the demands of the local communities. People

from different cultural backgrounds have worked together to see their aspirations and important cultural rules included in the project of economic growth (Sand 2013). As a consequence, the Deva region has become in just a decade one of the best known archaeological areas of New Caledonia and more largely in Melanesia. A large media coverage was given to the excavations fulfilled in Deva, in order to inform as often as possible the general public on the work underway. A series of exhibitions presenting the main discoveries and material remains recovered were prepared for the general public, on site as well as in the capital city Noumea, assorted to a simple attractive leaflet publication (Sand et al. 2013). A 3 km long heritage path associated to a natural environment path, is dotted with large posters synthesizing the main archaeological discoveries. Regular visits of major archaeological sites are organized for the public in the Deva valleys. Probably as important for us as all these informative actions, a number of schools from the Bourail region have come to Deva for field visits with their teachers, even if they knew that they would see human remains. Each time, on arriving to the site, the children would pay collectively their respect to the place and its indigenous occupants (fig. 6), before listening to the explanations given to them by the local archaeologists but also by a representative of the local Kanak clans. This appeared to us as the best way to allow the voice of the local communities, and amongst them the indigenous voice, to be heard by all.



Figure 6. School classes presenting their respect to the traditional representatives before entering the Deva property to visit archaeological excavations.

In a country actively engaged in a decolonizing process, this sharing of words and experiences participates in a process of social building of links between groups of differing cultural origins. Archaeology, today in New Caledonia as in the 19th century in Europe, is one of the paths to the creation of a national identity, and this identity can only arise in our context by incorporating the different heritages of the local communities into one narrative (Sand et al. 2011a).

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